

The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure



Department of Geography and Faculty of History

Top of the Campops: 60 things you didn't know about family, marriage, work, and death since the middle ages

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When did spinsters spin?

Amy Erickson

Since the 16th century, 'spinster' has denoted a never-married woman. Until 2005, in marriage registers all brides were either a spinster or a widow, and all grooms either a bachelor or a widower. But 'spinster' originated in the 14th century, formed from the verb 'to spin' with the feminine suffix 'ster', to mean a woman who spun a textile fibre. Presumably, spinning was so common an activity among single women that the second meaning grew out of the first.

Marital or occupational status?

When encountered in historical documents, 'spinster' has invariably been read by historians as a designation of marital status, since it became in the 17th century the principal identification of a never-married woman, taking over from 'singlewoman' and 'maiden' or 'maid'. An unmarried woman could sue or be sued, and could own property, unlike a married woman, so establishing marital status was important. At the end of the 17th century, at a time of concern over low marriage rates in England, spinster also acquired its pejorative meaning, alongside the creation of the 'old maid'.



Michael Sweerts, An Old Woman Spinning

(<http://www.artuk.org/artworks/an-old-woman-spinning-5551>) . The Fitzwilliam

Museum.

'Spinner' also meant a person who spun, of either sex, from at least the 15th century if not earlier, and retained its occupational meaning without mutation. But despite the availability of 'spinner', spinster continued to be used in its occupational as well as its marital sense in some places through the 18th century.

In 1767, for example, parliament required 'Returns of Papists' from every parish to list the names and occupations of Catholics. There were particularly large numbers in northwest England, some of them immigrants from Ireland. In parishes throughout Lancashire and Cheshire, women who were listed alongside men of the same age (apparently husbands) and children were recorded as 'spinsters', which suggests that this was the occupational usage. In some places, all Catholic females over the age of 10 were 'spinsters' so the word in those cases must be used occupationally rather than maritally.

The Westmorland survey of 1787 specified marital status as well as occupation, and in that listing, both married women and widows were identified as 'spinsters' by occupation. As late as 1801, the draft listing for the first census in the township of Winwick with Hulme, north of Warrington, listed women as 'spinster' who were clearly married or widowed, and furthermore categorised these women as working in manufacture – thereby using the occupational rather than the marital meaning of spinster. For the south of England, spinner appears to have been more commonly used, and where spinster is used, its meaning is uncertain.

Family	Names of the Inhabitants with the Head of each Family	Religious Affection	Males	Females	State of Marriage	Profession or Occupation	Agriculture	Manufactures
46	Nancy Baker	36	1		Spinster			
	Jane D.	13	1		Employ'd in the Cotton Manufacture			
	Roger D.	9	1					
	John D.	8	1	4				2

Winwick 1801 listing, Household 46. Reproduced with the permission of Cheshire Archives & Local Studies.

Why does this matter?

Spinning was one of the most important employments for women for over 500 years. One estimate based on the volume of cloth that England exported in the 17th century suggests that almost every woman in the country must have been spinning. Spinning was mechanised gradually, from the 1740s for silk (always the smallest textile sector), from the 1780s for cotton, and later for linen and wool.

Mechanised spinning machines were operated by men, so very large numbers of women lost employment. When calculating women's labour force participation from population listings prior to 1800, it makes a big difference whether 'spinsters' are counted as unmarried or as spinning.

We tend to think of spinning as done on a wheel. These were introduced in England in the later middle ages from India, and there were a wide range of different types of wheel for different types of fibre and yarn. They could be positioned indoors in the kitchen, or outdoors for better light as illustrated below. In the mid-17th century Geertrydt Roghman depicted a woman at a spinning wheel with a small child helping (<https://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/blog/2025/01/23/working-from-home/>) or playing.



A woman spinning on a wheel in front of a cottage. Trustees of the British Museum, asset number [1512582001](#) (<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1512582001>) .

But the strongest yarn was spun with the simple technology of a distaff (stick) and spindle (drop weight), which could be taken anywhere. In the mid-18th century, Paul Sandby sketched a [woman walking with her distaff](#) (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_Nn-6-44) . At the end of the 18th century, Thomas Bewick's [Mother Goose](#) (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1882-0311-4328) showed a woman simultaneously teaching children and spinning. In Jean Louis Desmarne's etching (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1849-1208-541) , the shepherdess spins while minding the animals.

The yarn that was to be used as warp for weaving was different from that to be used for weft. And yarn intended for knitting was different again from that used in weaving. Stockings and caps could be made on the knitting frame illustrated below. Thicker fishermen's wear (jerseys, guernseys, ganseys) was knitted by hand. Knitted cardigans and jumpers for the general population only appeared in the 20th century.



J. Hinton, 'The Art of Stocking Framework Knitting', Universal Magazine, 1751. Trustees of the British Museum, asset number [849207001](#) (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_Y-4-429) .

Representations of women spinning

Spinning was a quintessentially female activity in the ancient world, regularly [illustrated on Greek pottery](#) (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1873-0820-304) . Its representation of female virtue was perhaps another reason that 'spinster' transmuted from a woman who spun to a 'maiden'. Eve was depicted spinning while suckling Cain and Abel in a 12th-century carving from Ferrara.



Eve with Cain and Abel, Ferrara,
c.1135. Author's photo.

St Anne is occasionally depicted spinning, such as in [this engraving](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_115-134) (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_115-134) while teaching the Virgin Mary to read. George Romney painted [Emma Hart](https://friendsofkenwood.org.uk/collection/emma-hart-as-the-spinstress-by-romney/) (<https://friendsofkenwood.org.uk/collection/emma-hart-as-the-spinstress-by-romney/>) (who would become Lady Hamilton) spinning most romantically – although there is good reason to think that Hart never actually spun in her life.

From the mid-19th century onwards, images of women spinning are rarely set in England, but rather in [Scotland](https://blog.nms.ac.uk/2020/12/14/introduction-to-the-spinning-wheel-collection-in-national-museums-scotland/) (<https://blog.nms.ac.uk/2020/12/14/introduction-to-the-spinning-wheel-collection-in-national-museums-scotland/>) , [Ireland](https://weavespindye.ie/2015/01/30/history-of-spinning-in-ireland/) (<https://weavespindye.ie/2015/01/30/history-of-spinning-in-ireland/>) , or more exotic places, such as Rebecca Solomon's painting [reproduced in the London Illustrated News in 1858](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1860-0714-1120) (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1860-0714-1120) .

Although some men did spin, men were never depicted spinning. Putting a distaff in a man's hand was a means of ridicule. But in a woman's hands, the distaff could become a [weapon](https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/De-boezervrouw--a060b11d7d45dfa08f4ebfd2616a555) (<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/De-boezervrouw--a060b11d7d45dfa08f4ebfd2616a555>) .



'Madge and Bauldy', a woman assaults a man with her distaff; plate 8 of Alan Ramsay's 'Gentle Shepherd' (1788). Trustees of the British Museum, asset number [769170001](#) (<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/769170001>) .

The frequent images of women spinning reflect the ubiquity of this form of labour in the centuries before mechanisation. While that very ubiquity produced the elision of spinster with unmarried woman, today 'spinster' is most often employed pejoratively.

Next time you encounter it, remember the occupational basis of the marital descriptor which has, like so many words describing women, been weaponised to denigrate them.

Further reading

Open resources

[The Spinning Project](http://spinning-wheel.org/) (<http://spinning-wheel.org/>)

[V&A Museum British Knitting Traditions](https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/british-knitting-traditions?srstid=AfmBOorC_bt30gpPp7pUgc-BJX9AcrGqEASK_6fT1EU47Qq3pcAf_jx) (https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/british-knitting-traditions?srstid=AfmBOorC_bt30gpPp7pUgc-BJX9AcrGqEASK_6fT1EU47Qq3pcAf_jx)

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